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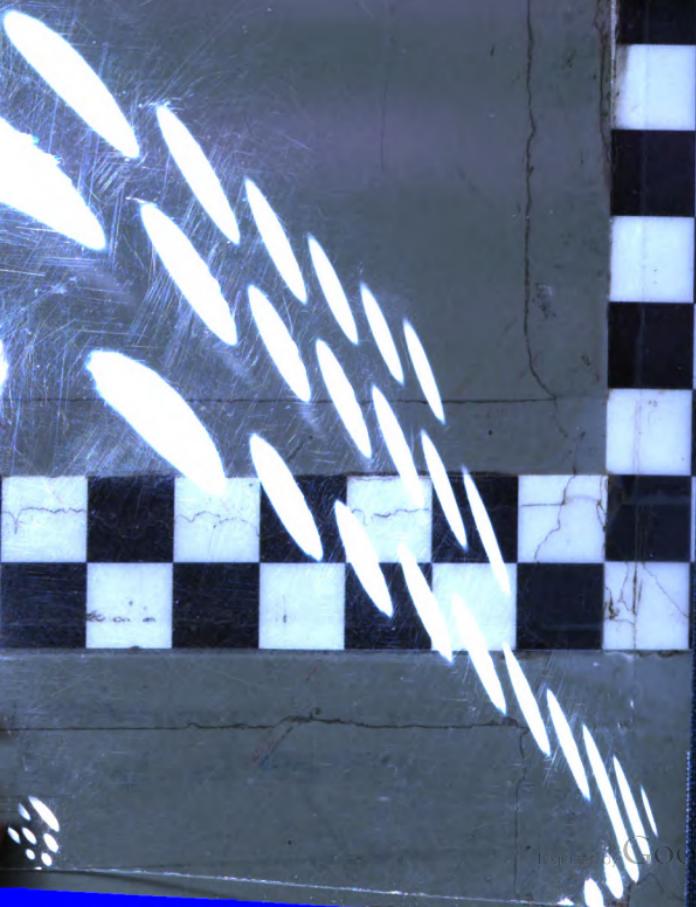


# THE NORTHERN ARRISONS

Eric Linklater

THE ARMY AT WAR

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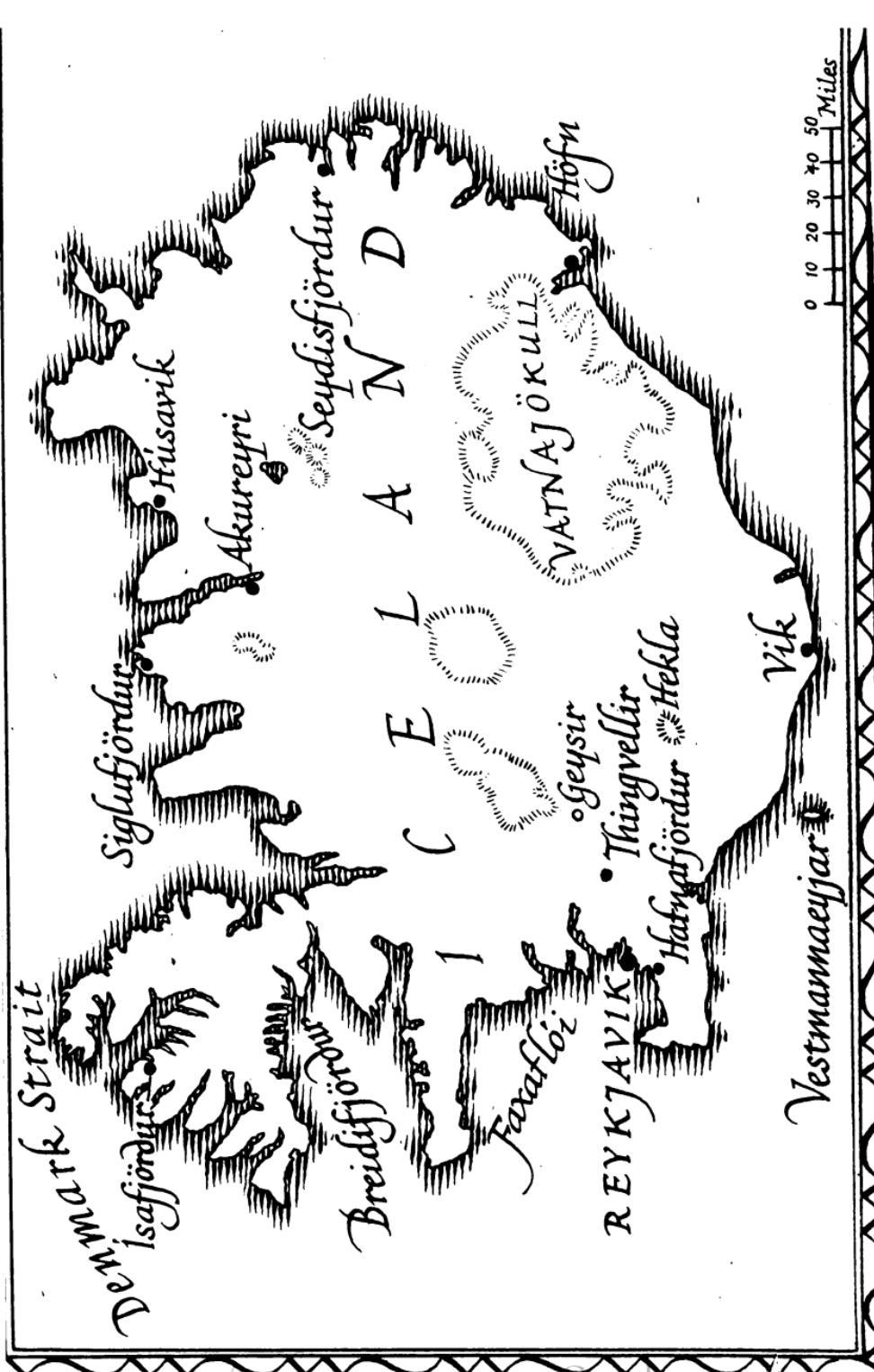




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Eric Linklater

THE ARMY AT WAR



MAJOR C. P. STACEY  
C.M.H.Q.  
THE NORTHERN GARRISONS

12.00

**THE ARMY AT WAR**

*Issued for*  
**THE WAR OFFICE**  
*by the*  
**MINISTRY OF INFORMATION**

*First Published 1941*

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York House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2 ;  
120, George Street, Edinburgh 2 ; 39-41, King Street, Manchester 2  
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Price 6d. net or 20s. for 50 copies.

Made and Printed in Great Britain by  
THE WHITEFRIARS PRESS LIMITED  
LONDON AND TONBRIDGE.

THE  
NORTHERN  
GARRISONS

By ERIC LINKLATER



THE ARMY AT WAR

LONDON  
HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE  
1941

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## THE NORTHERN GARRISONS

### i. *The Better Road*

A DOZEN YEARS AGO, when most of the world was at peace, and as conscious of its precarious good fortune as a man on a raft, an American woman said to me with considerable energy : "There can be only one excuse for another war. None of the old reasons—dynastic, religious, economic, the desire for power—is worth a war to people who remember the misery and frustration of the last one. None of the old boundaries, between this country and that, is worth fighting for. But there's a new frontier, a slowly forming frontier, that would be worth defending, even against the extravagance of tanks and poison-gas and bombers. It's a frontier of the mind."

"And where do you draw it?"

"Between the Sensibles and the Stupids. We've got to avoid fanaticism, and good sense is the only great cause about which its followers can't grow fanatical : because that would destroy the cause. And all the nicest virtues, like honesty and charity, are cultivated by the Sensibles, because they know that any tolerable society must be built on qualities of that sort."

"But the Stupids?" I asked.

"You don't want me to define them? It would take too long. But in a way they're old-fashioned people.

They cling to the most elderly vices, like cruelty and intolerance, greed and injustice."

"While the Sensibles," I enquired, "may be easily recognised by their opposite virtues?"

"Well, you mustn't expect too much," she said.

\* \* \* \* \*

I WAS DRIVING into Reykjavik over a crudely built and tormented road. The surrounding plain was covered with enormous cinders, and mountains rose to crests as ragged as a cock's comb. I said to the R.A.S.C. driver, "What do you think of Iceland?"

"Not much," he answered.

"How long have you been here?"

"About ten months."

"But you haven't got used to it yet?"

"Oh, I've got used to it all right. There's no good setting yourself against a place, if you've got to live in it. But it's not what I like."

I had heard the same sort of thing from soldiers in Orkney and Shetland. I was to hear it again in the Faeroes. There, scattered widely over the sea, were men who had willingly undertaken a long and tedious duty, a duty whose tedium could only be relieved by danger, because they had realised the issue of the war, and because they knew, by intuition if not by active reason, that Hitler was wrong—biologically wrong—and Britain, with all its faults, was on the better road. They had made their choice, and they were sticking to it with intelligence, determination, and a good-humoured endurance which were to my mind the very stuff of such a victory as my American friend had desired. The victory of the Sensibles over the Stupids.

These soldiers, doing garrison-duty in the North Atlantic islands, possess qualities upon which our future civilisation—a civilisation more handsome to the eye, more flattering to the mind, more soothing to the conscience—may very solidly be raised. Few of them enjoy a soldier's life. They put up with it, and make the best of it, because they know the reason of their service: because they have a sense of responsibility. Their temper is individual, easy going, but with merely a perfunctory grumbling they accept an exigent discipline, and respond to it. Many of them are serving in small detachments, remote from their fellows and far away from easy amusement, and in these circumstances they are discovering—or many of them are discovering—unsuspected resources in themselves. They have turned their hands to all manner of unfamiliar jobs, they have learnt to rely on their own strength and ingenuity. And their officers are showing imagination, initiative, and leadership.

### *Leadership and Imagination*

The Army has always known that leadership is one of the supremely important human qualities, and less regimented, more consciously intellectual critics have been equally aware of the value of imagination. You have only to visit, let us say, a few coastal batteries in Iceland or Shetland to perceive how right is the Army, and how right the intellectual observer. A disciplined body of men cannot always show individual intelligence—even a committee cannot, and certainly a crowd will never do so, because there is something paralysing in numbers—their intelligence can only be shown in intelligent response to intelligent leadership. But the sort of leadership required of a Battery Commander on the untenanted slope of a snow-bound Icelandic fjord is more difficult than the quick decision and personal courage of a subaltern who





sees a sudden opening in the field, and leads his platoon to a successful attack. The leadership required in garrison-duty requires considerable imagination. The nearest enemies are boredom and inertia, and before they can be attacked, the officer must understand the nature of his men, the hunger of their minds and their digestive capacity, and then contrive ways to satisfy their needs. Many officers are doing so with conspicuous success.

One day, to a Regular officer of about thirty years' service, I said something of this sort, and praised the Army of to-day—perhaps by way of bait—in comparison with the Army of the last war. He admitted a growing intelligence, but accused it of softness. The men, he said, had not been trained to the hardness necessary for really bitter campaigning. To the pitch of stubborn endurance, both physical and mental, that was necessary for either prolonged attack or successful rearguard-action. The modern soldier, he declared, was being pampered. Battle-dress had encouraged him to be slovenly, and he had learnt to expect an E.N.S.A. concert, or free cinema show, as the normal conclusion to a day's work. And the officers, or too many of them, were allowed to believe that battles could be won without losses.

In the first winter of the war there was some truth in these charges, but in that winter the country as a whole had not attuned itself to war, and a host of young officers, with negligible experience and a minimum of training, were unhappily trying to cope with the twin difficulties of learning their own jobs and keeping their men occupied. Soldiers need a great deal of looking after, and junior officers had to learn the necessity of being Argus-eyed about such matters as boots and rations, arms and equipment, socks and shirts and sore throats and requests for compassionate leave. Army administration, more-

over, is a tangled thicket to the newcomer, and many a Company Commander, who would gladly have been hardening his men for battle, had to spend dreary hours with Allowance Regulations and the Paymaster's correspondence in order to unravel the financial difficulties of his Officers and Other Ranks.

An officer whom I knew well once took from his pocket-book the copy of a letter which read as follows :—

S U B J E C T : Pay and Allowances—Officers.  
The Command Paymaster,  
——— Command.

Reference : C.P. Pl.C./Allowances/Trav./101-23,  
dated 3.5.40.

Lieut. J. K. W.....  
2/Lieut. T. R. P.....

See my A.F. 01848, Serial No. 31, dated 22.4.40. Claims on behalf of these officers have already been amended in response to your C.P. Pl.C./Allowances/Trav./98-43, dated 18.4.40. The amended claims were as follows :—

Lieut. J. K. W.....	1 night's Det. Allowance Rate I (Allowance Regs. p. 354) and R.A.H.R. (with M.S.E.) for period 29.2.40—1.3.40 incl.
2/Lieut. T. R. P.....	1 night's Det. Allowance Rate I and R.A.H.R. (with M.S.E.) for period 29.2.40—4.3.40 incl.

Copies of A.Fs. 01771 in respect of these officers, as previously corrected, are herewith enclosed.

The letter was dated May 10th.

“ The composition of that thing,” he said, “ with the necessary checking and disentangling, occupied half the morning of the day on which Jerry punched his first hole in the French line. It's a magnificent letter, as such things go, and I'm rather proud of it. You may say that it's quite incomprehensible, but I assure you that it fitted the case like a glove. It was necessary to write it,

and I was the only person capable of writing it. It was a good job of work—and can you tell me how it helped to hold up the Boche advance?"

But nowadays familiarity has lessened the difficulties of administration, and soldier-clerks have been trained to deal with most of them. Nowadays an officer has more time to spend on war training, and in the Northern Garrisons the hardening process is very zealously pursued.

There is a Highland battalion in Orkney whose Commanding Officer took advantage of the very severe winter to inaugurate night marching. Over the island roads, swept by wind and bitter with sleet, his companies navigated the long darkness. One night, on the northern shore of Scapa Flow, the leading sections had to link arms to brace themselves against the winter gale. But they did eighteen miles, and no one fell out. And when the weather improved their training took them to sea, in small boats and drifters, and they began to practise the business of landing on unknown shores, of assaulting rocky beaches. It is a pretty sight to see them leaping, heavy-burdened, into the cold green sea, and charging ashore. They do it with a Highland élan—though many of the Highlanders, to tell the truth, are Cockneys—and they seem to enjoy it. Softness has been eliminated from that battalion.

In Shetland there are long hill-slopes, great empty valleys that pasture black-faced sheep, but were good for nothing else till they became a training area. Now they are busy every day with soldiers in battle-order and the swiftness of mimic war. There is room and to spare for far-flung exercises, that interfere with nothing but the nesting birds—black-headed gulls, peewits and terns, most bitterly object—and the soldiers return from a twenty-mile march, with a battle thrown in, looking strong and cheerful. They complain, however, that

training becomes a bore when there is no enemy to freshen the appetite for it: after so many imitation battles, they feel a restless desire to try their strength on reality. The hardening process has made them fit for action, and they know it.

In the Faeroes there are Gunners who keep their quarters as smart and clean as a Housing Exhibition—no slackness there—and the Lovat Scouts patrol the hills and cross high cloudy moors with a stalker's speed, or sail from island to island in seas that could make a member of the Cruising Club look serious. Softness is not apparent there.

In Iceland, on lava fields where nothing lives—mile after mile of withered moss and volcanic boulders—you may see training battles that very closely imitate reality. Because of the great extent and desolation of the country, the Gunners can fire live shells, the Infantry can advance under a real barrage, and use their own weapons with singular freedom. The men have been toughened by a sub-arctic winter, and now, with uncommon thoroughness, they are being taught the circumstances and clamour of a battle-field. The Iceland Force is hard-working, muscled hard, and well acquainted with climatic hardship.

The hardening process is general. Toughness has been acquired but not at the expense of qualities not less valuable. The men have kept their balance, their tolerance, and good humour. They grumble, of course. They are pretty well browned-off, they will tell you. But their good nature miraculously survives the toughening to which they have been subjected, and their dislike of far-away and lonely service.

They are the proper people to be fighting the war of the Sensibles against the Stupids; and they are fit to do it. They themselves, their life and future, make our cause sufficient.

## II. *The Strategy of The Stepping-Stones*

IT IS A good many years since the Americans with their genius for making language picturesque, christened the Atlantic the Herring Pond. This affectionate diminutive was prophetic. From the day of that imaginative baptism the Atlantic has grown narrower and narrower, till on the outbreak of the second German war it became our principal Communication Trench. Great Britain was the forward zone of the war of the Sensibles against the Stupids, and the United States were the great Reserve area from which, it soon grew obvious, we should be supplied, in ever-increasing quantity, with munitions and food and fuel and arms.

But the Communication Trench had to be guarded. It was open to attack by U-boats and surface raiders. It became more vulnerable after the German conquest of Norway and France. The long-range bomber was added to its enemies and the Battle of the Atlantic was fought with gathering intensity. From the beginning of the war it was a ruthless battle, and before long it became apparent that it would be a decisive battle. Loss of the battle would mean starvation for Britain. Victory would ensure our line of communication and the power, with America's good will, to draw on the illimitable strength of the United States.

Fortunately for us there existed, on the one side of the trench, the chain of islands which have been transformed into the armed camps of our Northern Garrisons. From these bases the Navy and the Royal Air Force have defended the Atlantic trench; and the Army has

defended the bases. We have suffered grievous losses in the battle, but the trench has remained open. Our Merchant Navy, magnificent in its workaday dress and undrilled heroism, goes to and fro and the strength of the Americas comes pouring in. The islands have served a strategic purpose of the highest importance.

They may also remind us of a platitude which has never had the serious attention it deserves : that history has a tendency to repeat itself. Nearly a thousand years ago the islands became for a very little while the stepping-stones between the Old World and the New. The best men in Norway, refusing to accept a despotic king, went west over-sea to colonise Iceland and Orkney. Some time later the Icelandic Norsemen discovered and colonised a small part of Greenland. And from Greenland they made voyages to North America.

They were, however, too few in numbers to occupy and develop their new discovery. North America was to remain, for several hundred years, unknown to the older world, though it seems likely that stories of its wealth and beauty—the Norsemen called it Wineland—persisted in Iceland, and were told, perhaps, to Christopher Columbus when he sailed there in 1477. But Columbus, with his own notion of geography, rejected the northern route and went to look for India in the Caribbean.

It is only in our time that the Viking Road has been re-discovered, and also we have perceived that the Norsemen's stepping-stones are broad enough for a two-way traffic. America first made Greenland safe against German invasion, and now America goes forward to meet and then relieve our troops in Iceland. The stepping-stones may become a highway for the two nations that still hold, against all assault, their perilous and high belief in freedom and democracy.

This was the road by which America was first discovered. If it grows busy, with increasing traffic, it may be one of the roads from which we shall discover an even greater territory: our common interest in common sense, in freedom and justice and man's desire for the day when he, with all his neighbours, shall live in peace.

### *The Viking Road*

If you go to the farthest land in Scotland, and look north again, you will see the nearest of the islands that reach, like sentry-groups, across the cold front of the Atlantic battlefield. Orkney, Shetland, the Faeroes, and Iceland: that is the sequence, and though all the islands have their own characteristics, they make common property of stormy weather.

Orkney is the first of the archipelagoes. Over the Pentland Firth—it should be the Pictland Firth—lies the red-cliffed island of Hoy, like a lion at ease, and Hoy is one of the long walls of Scapa Flow, which, in this war as the last, is the chief anchorage of the Home Fleet. The other walls are the Mainland of Orkney and South Ronaldsay; and the gaps between them are partly filled by the lesser islands of Graemsay, Burray, Flotta, and some yet smaller. The chief purpose of the Orkney garrison is to man the walls that enclose the lake which accommodates the Fleet.

The people of Orkney are, for the most part, farmers who own their land and cultivate it with prudence, sufficient energy, and modern methods. They are of Norse descent, with an increasing strain of Scottish blood. Their cathedral of St. Magnus was founded in 1137, but that is a youthful building in comparison with the graves and villages that bewilder speculation with their prehistoric masonry. The islands, low lying for the most part, have for long been attractive to settlers, and the

Royal Air Force, the most recent colonists, have found them as useful a base as did the Vikings.

The climate is officially stated to be mild, but the troops there do not share this opinion. When their period of service in the islands has expired, however, many of them leave with a reluctance which, on their first arrival, they did not anticipate.

The Shetlands, which lie, centre from centre, about a hundred miles to the north-east of Orkney, are surprisingly different both in appearance and character. Their scenery has a wilder beauty, their land is poorer. The people, also of Norse descent, are sailors and fishermen rather than farmers. More than three thousand Shetlanders are, in this war, serving afloat either in the Royal Navy or the Merchant Navy. From north to south the islands stretch for seventy miles, but from east to west the sea often pinches them to the narrowness of a hill or two, or a couple of fields.

From Lerwick, the capital, to Bergen in Norway is only a hundred and eighty miles, and one of the functions of the garrison is obvious: to hold the islands against invasion. The other purpose is to protect the aerodromes from which the Royal Air Force patrols the Norwegian Coast and guards the Atlantic approaches.

Torshavn, the capital of the Faeroes, lies more than two hundred miles north-west of Lerwick. The Faeroes, from the sea, have a grim, a gloomy appearance. They are twenty or so in number, and rising abruptly from the ocean, contrive for much of the year to conceal their heights in cloud. They are Danish islands, but many of the people have strong nationalist tendencies. They speak their own language, and the men often wear their national costume: a dark red two-pointed cap, a closely-knitted jacket and waistcoat—navy-blue or brown—with silver buttons for Sunday, knee-breeches, and buckled shoes. They are fearless and skilful sailors, and

such industrious farmers that the lower slopes of their precipitous hills are belted with pasture or tillage, though every rood must first be cleared of boulders. Their soil is so thin that they must cut two turves to make a cover for every seed potato they plant, and when it has grown they replace the turves for pasture. Yet from this toilsome farming they have been able of late to export potatoes to Iceland.

These people, who have so many of the antique virtues—and it would be unfair to deny them one or two of the antique frailties—are friendly with our troops, and have shown them much hospitality. To compensate them for service in so far and stormy a region, our soldiers have sometimes shared the uncommon sport of whale-hunting: in the summer months a shoal of bottle-nosed whales, some ten or twelve feet long, will occasionally come into a fjord, and whenever this happens the whole of the adjacent male population will put to sea in small boats, and drive and harry the whales ashore, where they are slaughtered in a fine confusion of blood and blubber and joyous excitement, after which, it is likely, there will be a dancing of the Faeroese reel to the accompaniment of interminable Faeroese ballads. The kidneys of a whale are said to be a great delicacy.

### *Reykjavik—Town of Contrasts*

Iceland is bigger by a fifth than Ireland, and its northern extremities almost touch the Arctic Circle. Reykjavik, the capital, is a town of some forty thousand inhabitants, and anyone who has the time and the inclination may dance there every night of the week to an orchestra that is no worse than many other dance orchestras. It is an interesting town, and illustrates on all sides the recent material progress of the country, and the ambitious temper of its people. A generation ago the houses were

nearly all of wood—farm buildings of turf—but concrete has taken the place of timber, and now there are rows of new houses all built according to modern notions of simplicity and functionalism, a rank of windowed cubes with a shelf on each to catch the sun. And in the growing untidy streets, a mixture still of concrete, wood, and corrugated iron, there are little hat-shops, very daintily dressed, with an elegant sample or two of the latest fashions from New York; there are book-shops, half-a-dozen of them, that put to shame the illiteracy of many an English town of greater size; and there are flower shops where, through the driving snow of a spring blizzard, you may discern a sheaf of roses, a pot of hydrangeas, that have been grown in greenhouses warmed by the hot springs of this icy and volcanic island.

An interesting town, with a brand-new university of its own, a National Theatre—not wholly finished yet—and a statue to Leif Ericsson, the Icelander who discovered America. You will be told, of course, that Reykjavik is not Iceland; and indeed it differs greatly from the hinterland, where life has a patriarchal simplicity, a stark and noble loneliness, and in whose far-off valleys there has lived, as a vital thing, the greatest literature of the north; the common language is hardly altered from the years when the story of Burnt Njal was written, the sagas of Grettir the Outlaw, of Egil Skallagrimsson, poet and Viking. Their regard for this native literature, and their heroic past, has made the Icelanders a proud people; and, being proud, they did not welcome our intrusion.

But Iceland, because of its position, had to be occupied. It commands the North Atlantic, and if Germany had seized it first, the Battle of the Atlantic by now would have been a German victory.

### III. *Airway to the Isles*

TO TRAVEL SPEEDILY and well, one should attach oneself, if possible, to a General. There was a General whose duty was taking him to Iceland when mine also pointed there, and being ordered to join him I crossed the Atlantic in the rapid luxury of a Sunderland flying-boat.

We started from the North of Scotland, but because the weather was bad we flew first to Shetland. We crossed the knuckle-end of Scotland, a dismal landscape, through the mist, of dark moorland as full of holes, of tarns and lochans as a scarecrow's coat. Then the sea, white-edged, and dimly through the starboard cloud the memorial, on Marwick Head in Orkney, to Kitchener and the lost crew of the *Hampshire*. Then Fitful Head, and presently, in a confusion of Shetland voes, a leg of water that was our anchorage. Banking steeply, we came quickly down, and the sea rose to meet us. We, the passengers, stiffened ourselves to meet the shock. But there was no shock. We kissed the water with a soft and social impact, and gently glided on.

The weather was still bad, and we waited a day for its improvement. It grew better, it became as good as a duck-shooting morning—a dark and shifty sky, forty miles an hour of head-wind—so we took off on the voyage, of nearly seven hundred miles, to Reykjavik.

The captain of the Sunderland and his second pilot were both very young. They were slightly built, good-looking in a cheerful, boyish way, and neither had been

to Iceland before. Nor had their navigator. One had rather expected that the captain of so large a boat, with a crew of twelve and the North Atlantic to cross, would be a stern and thoughtful man, of ripe age, and showing on his face the grave lines of long experience. He would be able to speak of his many previous voyages, to assure one of his familiarity with all the difficulties of sub-Arctic navigation. . . . It was, therefore, not without surprise that one discovered the youthful confidence, the precocious maturity, the insouciant ability of the Royal Air Force.

The sea below had a rough unfriendly aspect, but there was no need to look at it. The Sunderland was so big that one could ignore the outer world. One could walk about, from deck to deck, and look at the fine furniture of bombs, the array of guns, the navigating instruments, and the galley which was to produce, in honour of the General, a three-course lunch. To eat a steak-and-kidney pie, fifteen hundred feet above the Atlantic in latitude 62 or so, was the sort of luxury, one felt, that might have been invented by the author of the Arabian Nights. But what a piece of work is Western man, who can turn the flying carpet into reality!

Through a window could be seen the prodigious crest of an island that rose sheerly from the sea. Dark in the driving clouds, it leaned forward with the humping back and the shrunk belly of a wave about to break. This was the end of Syderö, the southernmost of the Faeroes. After it there was nothing to be seen, for a long time, but white-hooded waves and the iron-black sea—and suddenly, in the midst of them, a thin protruding object that disappeared again, but brought us steeply and swiftly down, in tip-tilted circles, to stare and search for it. A submarine? It might have been a periscope. But there was another, and there a third. "Porpoises," said the captain with a deep disgust.

A little more than five hours after leaving Shetland we perceived, high in the cloudy sky before us, a streak of snow. That was Iceland. Then slowly there came into sight a most extraordinary beach. It was enormous, it appeared to be quite level, and it was black. It was broken by the branching mouths of a river, and for mile after mile it was edged with the white lace of breaking seas. Inland of the great lava-flats were mountains of which nothing could be seen but their snowy tops. Our landfall was not very far from that made by Ingolf, the Norwegian chieftain, who, in the ninth century, planted the first colony in Iceland.

We turned west along the land, and the first sign of human enterprise that we saw was a wrecked ship, leaning wretchedly against the beach, with the waves breaking over her stern. Then, on the broadening coastal plain, a lonely house or two. The sky cleared, and the ribs of the mountains shone. They were all capped and cased with snow, and glaciers without movement came pouring down, and waterfalls stood frozen and amazed. The houses grew more numerous on the plain, which had become a dun or yellowish colour, seamed and patterned by innumerable water-courses. There was a house every twenty miles or so. And Hekla rose in the distance, the snow upon its shoulders like a stolen fleece in the sun.

In the roof of a Sunderland there is a glass dome, called the astral-hatch, from which observation is made of horizons, the declination of the sun, and suchlike matters. Stand with your head in the astral-hatch, and you have a roundabout view broken only by the great shark's fin of a rudder that rises so tall astern of you. The long smooth wings, the sleek hull of the boat, are below the level of your eyes, and you can see them slightly rocking—very slightly—like the wings of a sailing albatross. In the crystal dome you have the freedom of the air, and shreds of cloud come racing at your eyes, the land below drifts

slowly back. You realise, with a feeling of amazement, that the huge boat is actually flying. The sensation of flight invades your blood, and to circle, like an albatross, the great white tableland of Iceland is a very noble sensation indeed.

Then we rose to five thousand feet or so, to cross a range of cindery mountains, with a crusty ragged edge, that stood between us and Reykjavik. The view enlarged itself. It became an immense bewildering panorama of blanched volcanoes, of fjords and creeks and league-long pools in the plain. One had never seen so much of the earth at one time, nor so fantastic and strange a wilderness. But the captain and the second pilot and the navigator, who had never been to Iceland before and whose combined years were a good many fewer than three score and ten, looked out upon it with perfect composure, and at once perceived the watery bight on which we must descend. So down from mountain-height to sea-level we swiftly came, and gently met the sea, and presently were at rest upon Icelandic water. To a mind unused to so fast transition, there was something nearly half-incredible in our arrival.

But the navigator was rolling up his charts, and the captain preparing to go ashore for orders. To-morrow he might be on patrol or convoy duty, flying far to the south on a much longer voyage than ours. A twelve-hour patrol was the common thing, he said. Our trip from Shetland had been quite short, and would have been shorter by an hour had it not been for the strong head-wind.

How long had we been flying? Seven hours all but five minutes.

#### IV. *Iceland*

WHEN OUR soldiers landed in Iceland, in May of 1940, they were not received—as ingenuously they had expected—with open arms. The Icelanders were displeased by the occupation of their country and, being unable to prevent it, they decided to ignore it. To ignore it as far as possible, that is. They assumed towards our troops an attitude of frosty indifference, and our troops, being friendly people, and so sure of the virtue of their cause that they could not see how anyone should doubt it, were sorely puzzled by this reception.

A neutral country, however, can hardly be expected to welcome the appearance of a foreign army at its quays, and because the recent history of Iceland is dominated by the ambition of total independence, the blow to its pride, when strategic necessity compelled us to occupy the land, was particularly severe. Its jealous regard for a political solitude has been fostered, in a very interesting way, by its literature. The spoken word of to-day is almost the same as the tongue of the first settlers and the classical language of Snorri Sturluson ; and as this unusual continuity has been preserved by the Atlantic loneliness of the country, and as their historical pride is essentially a literary pride, so the people have set a high value on isolation. Isolation, by safeguarding their language, has kept their spirit whole.

But they are not insusceptible to flattery, and Germany, for some years, flattered them by taking a very intelligent interest in all manner of things from Icelandic scholarship

to Icelandic roads, from volcanic geology to the younger men's readiness to form—under German guidance—ski-clubs and gliding-clubs. Many of the older people were educated in German universities, and retain for them the affection which German universities always inspired before the Nazis had their way with them ; and Nazi Germany, by offering university education at a far lower cost than England, maintained the academic connection.

In addition to this cultural amity there existed, among some of the younger Icelanders, a superstitious regard for German efficiency. This sort of regard, of course, was not confined to Iceland. It flourished wherever people permitted themselves to be impressed by the German talent for getting things done, without enquiring of their minds in what way such things were being done ; for what purpose ; and what was likely to be their consequence. In Iceland the legend of Nazi efficiency had circulated fairly widely.

There was, on the other hand, a feeling that England's virtue was somewhat *passée*, and that England had not paid much attention to Iceland. That except for a brace or two of professors we had neglected its culture and permitted ourselves to live in distressing ignorance of its classical literature. Englishmen came in small numbers to fish the Icelandic rivers, but they cared nothing for the Laxdale Saga or the poems of Egil Skallagrimsson. No small country likes to be under-esteemed ; and it was unfortunate that Iceland, being insular itself, was unable to realise the insularity of England, the huge extent and utter innocence of our indifference.

And then we, who had done nothing, or almost nothing, to breach the mental isolation of the country, had to occupy and hold it against the very people who had most cleverly and persistently wooed it. It was a difficult situation which would have been more difficult had not the majority of Icelanders recognised that Nazi

Germany had become a common enemy. That Nazi doctrines were inimical to their free spirit, their native individualism, and all their way of life whose origin, a millennium ago, had been rebellion against the despotism of an ambitious king.

### *The Soldiers Break the Ice*

From the earliest weeks of our occupation to the present time, however, there has been—and the process continues—a gradual improvement in our relations, and this improvement is due to three things: to the good sense of the Icelanders, to the good behaviour of our troops, and to the good market we offer for Icelandic produce.

“The conduct of your troops,” an Icelander told me, “has been beyond all praise.” Another, a scholar and a traveller, said emphatically, “Their behaviour has been unbelievably correct.”

The military authorities have interfered as little as possible with civilian life and economy. In such matters as the requisitioning of land and buildings, most conscientious efforts have been made to avoid infliction of hardship, and camp after camp has been sited far less conveniently than it could have been had we shown less care and regard for the small and scanty fields of the Icelandic farmer. And we have, of course, brought a great deal of money into the country. All the local produce is bought—mutton and milk and fish—and local labour is paid high wages. In March of this year about £30,000 was paid out in wages; and like his British *confrère*, the Icelandic labourer is properly compensated for his wounded conscience when he agrees to work on the Sabbath day: 4.50 kronur an hour, to be precise; three shillings and fourpence in English money.

In the remoter parts of the country, where small detachments of our troops were living near small com-

munities, friendly relations were very soon established. Like all northern people, the Icelander, when no political ideas inhibit him, is a hospitable person, and the normal English soldier has an essential decency that is, in the long run, more effective than diplomacy and better than any propaganda. The Icelandic children were the first to recognise it. Iceland is rich in children—handsome youngsters with fair hair and pretty features—and they soon discovered that our troops were not imperial marauders, but companionable people with easy manners and a domestic liking for children's company.

There is a story told of a Senior Officer who arrived in a northern village where a mere handful of soldiers kept watch upon the little harbour. He walked down the street, accompanied by a Corporal, and on both sides the regarding villagers behaved in the politest way imaginable. Men touched their caps, and women bowed, and children all saluted. The Senior Officer was duly pleased, and recalled his experience with pride.

Then he was told: "But it wasn't you they were saluting. They don't know you, but they all know Corporal Watsisname. He is the British Army here, and the British Army, in consequence, is very highly respected."

Corporal Watsisname came from Huddersfield, I think. There was a very strong flavour of Yorkshire in the Garrison, and a good palatable flavour it was. In the early months of the occupation there had been a large proportion of Canadian troops—Canadians with Scots names and French names, Highlanders from the prairie and descendants of the *voyageurs*—but they were withdrawn for service elsewhere; and Yorkshire was left as the dominant influence.

### *Army of the Arctic*

What are the special conditions of service in Iceland? Loneliness and hard weather. The long darkness of the

winter nights, and prodigious gales that blow with icy violence. Lack of communications, lack of mail, lack of news, lack of amusement and lack of beer.

Against the climate the troops are as well equipped as a good polar expedition. They have fur caps, great double-skinned wool-and-waterproof overcoats, double sleeping-bags, proper boots and underclothes. Their Nissen huts are built with concrete ends and have stood well against the weather. But outdoor work and training, when an Arctic gale is blowing, are still a test of endurance. Such winds appear to freeze, not fingers only, but the mind.

Against loneliness and boredom there are many weapons—and they are needed. There is work, and the Iceland Force has had plenty of work to do, has still plenty, and does it with curiously little grumbling. There is discipline, and the Iceland Force, if peace were declared to-morrow, could march through London next week with as smart a bearing, as steady a drill, as if it had spent its last year at Aldershot. There are the new principles of Army welfare, and the officers of the Iceland Force deserve much credit for the energy and imagination with which they have put them into practice.

In every unit, so far as I could discover, some sort of scheme had been devised to occupy and exercise the minds of the men during the long winter darkness when outdoor training was reduced to a minimum. The schemes varied in accordance with the available resources—in small detachments the supply of possible instructors was naturally not large, and as all the roads were snow-drowned, instructors could not easily be borrowed from neighbouring units—but a most resolute ingenuity, it appeared, had generally been used, and many of the winter programmes of entertainment and education were extremely attractive. They ranged from debating societies to classes in metal-work. They included concert

parties and lectures on architecture. In Reykjavik there was an admirably produced, amusingly written, and well-acted pantomime ; in many places there was elementary teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic ; and determined young officers, in the snow-bound solitude of most desolate valleys, delivered earnest homilies on civics.

### *Winter Programme*

In a certain Yorkshire battalion the winter programme was remarkably comprehensive and set forth in detail. It is worth summarising.

Training was divided under the three headings of Technical Military Training ; General Education ; Physical Training and Discipline. The technical training had a broad front, from ski-ing to a Tactical School ; physical training and discipline, on orthodox lines, had produced a battalion of very smart appearance and good demeanour ; and the syllabus of general education is quoted hereunder.

### GENERAL EDUCATION

The object of this is to increase mental alertness. Every man will spend one term on education, of a specialist or general character according to his previous attainments. Every man will be encouraged to take up a hobby. A Battalion Exhibition of Arts and Crafts is being arranged.

a. SPECIALIST CLASSES are for men in possession of an Army Second Class Education Certificate or its equivalent ; those who have matriculated ; and a few men who, on account of their age and employment, are more suited to learn a handicraft than likely to benefit from general education.

Classes have been arranged in : Book-keeping, Shorthand, Mechanical Drawing, French, German, Carpentry, Metal Work, Wireless, Painting, First Aid, Pastry Cooking and Motor Mechanics.

Vacancies for the first two terms have been allotted.

Os. C. Detachments are encouraged to arrange additional classes for their men as facilities exist, and so long as other training and duties are not interrupted.

*b. GENERAL EDUCATION*: each Company and Detachment will organise this. Each man not selected for a specialist class will attend for one term during which he will NOT be removed for other duties except in an emergency.

Each course will consist of 72 one-hour periods, made up as follows :—

Arithmetic . . . . .	20 periods.
English History . . . . .	15 "
Geography and Map Reading . . . . .	15 "
Composition and Grammar . . . . .	10 "
English Literature . . . . .	12 "

The last period for each subject will be devoted to a Test Paper which will be set from Battalion H.Q. All who obtain 60 per cent. or more marks will be awarded an Education Certificate signed by the C.O. stating that they have reached the standard of a Second Class Army Certificate of Education.

*c. DEBATING*: Debates will be held at all Detachments, on military and other subjects as laid down in Training Instructions No. I and Appendix A thereto. A firm Chairman is required, and all men should be encouraged to speak at some debate, however shortly.

### *News from Home*

This battalion has also devised a means of allaying the intense anxiety which afflicts the men whenever they hear that such-and-such a town has been bombed, and there have been casualties. This anxiety, with a tortured sense of responsibility, is the most grievous burden for all troops serving in distant garrisons. They themselves may at the time be remote from attack, and their comparative or temporary immunity serves to sharpen their fear for the safety of their families. They do not relish danger for its own sake, but when the Luftwaffe is hailing upon England they would greet Göring's bombers with delight, that they might share the perils of their wives and children, their sweethearts and their mothers at home. But all they can do is to wait with grim hearts for good news or bad.

This particular battalion, by creating in its home-town a committee whose members, immediately after an air-

raid, visit the homes of all men serving in it, and cable any ill-tidings, has done all it can to minify the recurrent periods of tense and anxious waiting.

Communication, not merely from one part of Iceland to another, but between Britain and Iceland, is unfortunately slow, and the mail service is subject to an occasional paralysis that leaves many a soldier without a letter to read for several weeks at a time. And when the soldier is receiving no letters, he is writing none. Or very few. Because our civilisation is so largely a domestic civilisation, and the soldier is primarily interested in the affairs of his own home.

There are exceptions, of course, but the average soldier, though living between a snow-shouldered volcano and the black deeps of the Atlantic, will write mostly of the tender, the comfortable, and familiar happenings in his native street. Of his friends who have been on leave, and the little adventures that his girl recites. Of his father's rheumatism—heritage, most like, of a dug-out at Passchendaele—or the new cushion-covers that his wife has been making. Of his children, who are growing beyond his memory and will strain his recognition when he sees them next. Of the dining-room table, that has escaped a blitz, and the corner pub where they draw their mild and bitter behind boarded windows now.

These are his thoughts, and the things of which he loves to write. But he must have news from home—news of the pub and the cushion-covers—before he can sit down to compose his next letter. A more frequent and more regular mail-service would be a great comfort to the men in Iceland.

Of the larger sort of news they are given a smallish ration on the air. Wireless reception is difficult in Iceland, and the portable battery-set is quite insensitive to Home programmes. But there is a local Broadcasting Corporation in Reykjavik, and the Iceland Force has very wisely

bought an hour a day of its time, which it fills with local talent and a great deal of ingenuity, concluding with a re-transmission of one of the English news bulletins. But the bulletin is brief, a thin and meagre summary, and only whets the raging modern appetite for current information. To compensate their lack of news, the Iceland soldiers are fertile in the invention of rumours, which they believe by the willing suspension of disbelief.

Of entertainment, other than the produce of their own wit and voices, they have very little, though occasionally they are visited by an adventurous concert-party. Such a party, an E.N.S.A. group, arrived during the winter in a small steamer that met, just south of Reykjavik, the worst hurricane for half a century. A hurricane that has already become a legend, that blew motor-cars off the road and drove ships ashore, and reached a prodigious velocity ; though what was the number of miles per hour at which it blew cannot now be established, for no two people will agree about it, and there was some confusion, it seems, between miles and kilometres. But the wind was great, the E.N.S.A. party's ship had been a week at sea, and when she arrived in Reykjavik she was coated in ice and dressed in white like pictures of an explorer's vessel in the Polar Sea. And no sooner had they arrived than the concert party had to go aboard another ship, for their opening date was in the very north of Iceland, and at that performance, and at many others, they assuredly earned their pay ; for not only were they clever and accomplished, and the girls pretty, but they were unsubdued by cold and the weariness of travel, and played with as gay a spirit as if they had merely walked to the end of a pier at Blackpool.

#### *Roll Out the Barrel*

Though the troops have learnt to provide nearly all their own amusement, they have as yet found no means of

repairing their lack of beer. The men are well fed, and Army rations, in nearly every unit, are handsomely supplemented by fish. But they would be much happier if their diet included a little malt and hops. Icelandic beer is the depressing sort known as near-beer, and though arrangements have been made with a local brewery to produce a stronger and rather more palatable lager, there is not nearly enough to satisfy the thirst of an English garrison, and owing to the difficulties of transport it is not always possible to give the most northerly troops their meagre share. Were the brewery supplied with sufficient malt and casks, it could presumably meet the demand ; or the Army, perhaps, which has so ingeniously created Mobile Laundries and Mobile Baths, might consider the provision of Mobile Breweries.

It may be argued, of course, that life can be supported without beer, and melancholy experience proves that such an existence is, indeed, not impossible. But though beer is not an absolute necessity, it is to Englishmen the first, the most requisite, the most wholesome of luxuries. And the Iceland Force deserves its pint. It is an admirable force. It has served us well and kept its spirit high. Let a shipload or two of decent ale be sent to cheer it against another winter.

## V. *Icelandic Pictures*

SHOULD ANYONE have difficulty in picturing the whole Icelandic scene, it may help him if he begins by imagining Ireland, grown appreciably in size and translated to the edge of the Arctic Circle, where summer is without night, and winter monstrously dark. He must deprive Ireland of nearly all its roads ; elevate the larger part of it to several thousand feet, and cover it with an ice-cap ; complicate it with extinct or quiescent volcanoes and hot springs ; girdle it with swamps and lava fields and furious winds ; and give it a population of largely-built and sturdy men, of handsome young women.

The young women, with their fine figures, carry themselves like athletes. They have, in general, beautiful hair, which they dress attentively, and on top of which—in Reykjavik, at least—they clap the quaint forms of modern hats. Hats like a lid, like a slanting shelf, like a cross between a shako and a horse's hoof. Some to the male eye merely comical, some elegant, but all up-to-date. Many of the elder women, however, still wear their national costume, which is dignified and attractive : a velvet skull-cap, tasselled, on long-braided hair, a formal apron over the dress, an ample shawl.

There is throughout the country a great regard for literature and music, and the piano is a popular instrument. During a voyage round the east coast of Iceland I met a pianist who showed the most remarkable devotion to her art.

The sea was rough, a turbulent meeting-place of wind and tide, and the ship was plunging steeply, then rolling

horribly off its plunge. But a young woman, with pale yet resolute face, was playing a piano in the saloon, and a couple of young men, clearly unhappy, sat listening to her. She finished her piece in a hurry, and went out in order to be sick. Then, stern and composed, she returned and began to play another tune. The young men wore a far-away expression.

I thought I recognised the new tune as a Swedish song I once had heard. I crossed the saloon and asked her the name of it ; but she had no English. The two young men, with much courtesy, emerged from their depression and came to our assistance. There was some debate, a mustering of their English, and then one of them explained : “The song is called by two names, one Danish and one Icelandic. In consequence of the Danish name it is called *A day is not a day without love*. But in consequence of the Icelandic name it is called *On the waves of the wild sea*.”

It does not require a psychologist to see here a difference of temper in the two countries ; and the sterner preference of the northern island was obviously conditioned by its geography. . . . On this side the coastline was treacherous and flat, but sprouted stony pinnacles. From the viewless land a ledge of rock appeared, with reefs before it on which the sea broke in grey fountains. Shoreward of the ledge lay the wreck of a fishing-boat and farther in, a much older wreck was a heap of rusty iron plates. Here was the entrance to a harbour, a seemingly impossible entrance between sandy bars and through steep waves that crumbled on either side to foam.

### *Spartan Views*

Farther north we came into a fjord, bleak and barren as I thought, and saw a narrow little village sitting nakedly on a hillside. The houses were white, and the hill was

white with snow. It all looked very cold and comfortless, but an officer who had been in Iceland for nearly a year said appreciatively : " That's rather a nice little place, isn't it ? It must be quite a sun-trap in summer."

The troops in our sub-Arctic garrison have learnt a Spartan view of life. They have become acclimatised to bleakness, and in the farthest north they speak contemptuously of the relaxing air of Reykjavik. " It's always muggy down there," they say. " You might as well be in England."

This was April, but in the north-easterly fjords the snow still lay to the water's edge. Soldiers in white clothes, ski-shod, were climbing a broken slope above the usual Nissen hamlet and a stream, new-melted, that came rushing down a steep ravine. They turned, ran swiftly down hill, came into line, and quickly found firing positions. They were tall, good-looking men, very fond of ski-ing, and already trained to do thirty miles a day. They had had a good sports meeting a few days before. One of the most popular events was a V.C. race to bring in stuffed sacks from the far side of a broad, half-frozen stream.

There was something like a road on one side of this fjord. It was holed like a colander and partly flooded. It crossed the bed of a stream and a tremulous wooden bridge. The hillside rose above, terraced with volcanic ramparts, roofed as steeply as a cathedral nave. The road, for some relief, ran down to the beach. Bumping and banging, our truck over-ran the weedy shingle, charged a boulder or two, and turned again into uphill ruts.

We left the truck and climbed to a higher camp. The snow, beside a beaten track, was still shoulder-high. A frozen waterfall hung glimmering in the mist. A week or two before some officers, on skis, had crossed the snow-filled camp from roof to roof. Rations had to be

brought from the water's edge, man-hauled in sledges, a six-hour job. Between the fjord and the rest of Iceland there was no communication except by sea, and a ship came only at longish intervals. Were anyone so clumsy, during the winter months, as to break a couple of lamp chimneys, then his hut, for most of the time, had to live in darkness. The soldiers lived in the risk of such tribulations as beset an Arctic explorer.

### *Spring Meetings*

In these narrow fjords they see nothing of the sun, except its occasional light on the mountain-tops, for three or four months in the year. And when the sun at last looks down on them, there is a great feeling of triumph and release. When the returning sun first touches their roofs the Icelanders make holiday and feast their neighbours. Servants and friends sit down together, served by the mistress of the house, and eat a ritual pancake—which, if stuffed with cream, needs no such excuse.

Spring had already come to the farthest north. From the shores of a shallow bay the snow had all receded, and the brown land shone cleanly in the sun. On a rocky islet there was the smallest flush of green.

In a broad valley a village of widely dispersed Nissen huts lay between a river and the mountains. The shoulders of the mountains were still white and the upper glens full of snow, but the lowlands were bare. Here and there, in some small field, there was the first green of new grass, and a mile away, a cold bright blue, lay a steep-sided fjord.

One of the Nissens was being spring-cleaned. A dozen pairs of skis and ski-ing sticks stood against the wall, and the men's faces, shining with grease, were a polished brown. They had just come down from four days' exercise in the snow. This was the last of their

winter tours. They had carried with them, on sleighs drawn by Greenland huskies, their food and tents and sleeping-bags. They had built an igloo, they had manœuvred in the high recesses of the hills, and fired their rifles at dazzling targets. Their own country was the Fenland, and few of them, in their civil life, had ever seen a mountain.

In a neighbouring valley there was a sudden clamour as the engines started of a troop of Bren carriers. They stood, undiscoverable, in well concealed stables that had been built, of turf and stones, with ingenuity and much labour, into the side of a hill. The builders and the drivers were Yorkshire Territorials.

The carriers were driven out, formed line ahead, and with a shattering din went swiftly up a small steep slope and down a gully strewn with lava pebbles, the size of cricket balls and cannon balls. Tossing and lurching, one heard the lava cricket balls exploding like gun-fire against the steel belly of one's carrier.

They changed direction, formed line abreast, and careered across a stony moor. A broad stream lay ahead. The carriers put their noses down the bank and seemed to hover for a moment. Then, with a great splashing and fountaining, plunged into the water. The water of the stream—it was, in other days, a famous salmon river—rose high against their sides, but without difficulty they crossed it. One of the carriers, earlier in the year, had encountered a small glacier, and been carried over a forty-foot cliff on to the rocky beach of a fjord. It was rescued, little the worse for its drop. Like the Yorkshire-men who drive them, the carriers are toughly made.

#### *National Character Revealed*

We are a conservative people. . . . There was a cookery school nearby, where the Sergeant-Instructor spoke of the

serious trouble he had had with some Cornishmen for whom he was cooking. Cornish pastry was on the menu, but the War Office's notion of a Cornish pastry differed from that of Cornwall, and the men, with much indignation, had utterly refused the meagre dish he offered them. Cornish pastry they had been promised, and they meant to have it. And a Cornish pastry measured eighteen inches long by eight inches broad, or was no such thing, they declared.

We returned to the sea. On the north-west coast were tall cliffs that rose to snow-clad mountains which went climbing into snowy cloud, multiplying their peaks and shoulders. To the south the land was blue with white patterns, but to the north the untroubled snow was bright gold in the evening sun.

The southward sky was dark and the weather turned rough. The Captain and his Chief Officer, both Scotsmen, were in a mood of mournful philosophy. They spoke about the manifold ills of to-day. Thought of such things, said one—a big, superbly healthy-looking man—kept him awake at night till he went nearly mad. Our education was to blame, said the other. Our educational system was getting worse and worse. . . . We are a conservative people.

Reykjavik and the surrounding country, when we left them, had been drab and earthy, but now the grass had come and fields were green. New energy was also at work among the soldiers, and Gunners, Infantry, and Sappers went about their duties with the utmost vigour. There was training, of course : Field Gunners mobile in the hills, Coast Gunners shooting with laudable accuracy at targets in the sea. There was labour on the roads, unending labour, and new camp construction and the building of fortifications. There were soldiers who did navvy work for eight hours a day, stood-to at the prescribed hours, performed their minor duties, and in their

spare time played football on a field which—before it became such a thing—was a volcanic refuse-dump, be-strewn with enormous boulders. Our soldiers found nothing ready-made in Iceland. Everything had to be built, and all their domestic amenities are the fruit of labour.

On the shore of a southern fjord there was an Officers' Mess, housed in the usual Nissen hut, but uncommonly distinguished by the magnificent view that filled the windows, and by the craft and the imagination which had created its furniture. Easy chairs and a sofa, all home-made, were upholstered, not uncomfortably, with old Army blankets, and in one corner a circular bar was smartly panelled with paintings of black and silver mountains, a growth of golden fir-trees. The electric lamps would not have shamed a modern flat.

We had so good a lunch that the cook, we concluded, must in private life have worked for some decent hotel.

"Indeed he didn't," said the Battery Commander. "In civil life he was a chimney-sweep."

### *A Yorkshire Soldier*

Driving into Reykjavik again, we found the road a little softer and more treacherous than it had been in the early morning. All the roads were melting. In the winter the earth is frozen a yard deep, so they melt by degrees into ever deeper layers of mud-soup and cinder-porridge. We drove, another day, by lava-fields and rough enormous moors to Geysir and to Thingvellir, where the Icelanders in their heroic age first thought of ruling the land by free discussion and debate, and held their sturdy parliament. The scenery was very fine, and grey geese flew beside the car. But the day was strenuous, and three times we were bogged in a sudden yielding of the road. Twice we dug out the car, with the spades we had

brought, but the third time it had sunk too deep. So we walked some miles to look for help, and found a detachment of Yorkshire infantry, whose officer lent us a truck.

The driver was a great-shouldered, thick-set man, quite young. He drove his truck over an appalling bouncing track with easy assurance, saying now and then, " You'd better hold on here." We had some conversation, and he told me that he had gone to France with his Territorial battalion, in which were serving also his six brothers. He alone had come back. Of his brothers, two were dead, two prisoners, and of the other two they had had no news at all.

And having suffered this overwhelming loss he was still serving his country with calm endurance. He was patient with our tedious difficulties, he was helpful to us, not because he was a soldier and had been told to help, but because there was still a great fount of kindness in him.

I had seen many fine things since morning, but the best of all was that Yorkshire soldier.

## VI. *Eagles of the North*

A SQUADRON OF the Royal Air Force had established its temporary headquarters in the nook of an Icelandic bay. The structure, the framework, of their headquarters had been fetched from the other side of the world, and what was now the Operations Room had once been familiar with globe-trotters, and Old China Hands, and Madrassi stewards. But over a panelled wall which had listened to the gossip of Shanghai and Singapore, and the ice clattering in countless stengahs, was now stretched a diagram of the North Atlantic battle-front.

It showed, in longitude twenty-something, an east-bound convoy, and the cardboard pattern of an aeroplane indicated the Sunderland that was escorting it. Inward-bound there was a second of these great flying-boats, returning from patrol, and two destroyers were speeding westward to meet another convoy. In the middle of the chart was the name of a merchant-ship, and the inscription: "0930/29. Left burning." Another name, and the addition: "1400/28. Sunk." In a jagged line were pinned some eight or nine blue shapes of cardboard. These represented the enemy, the U-boats, and against each one was shown the hour and date when its presence had become known.

It was, of course, an ever-changing battle-line, and the disposition of the enemy could not be exactly shown. It so happened, however, that the disposition of the U-boats, in their last-reported positions, made a sort of

fence running all athwart the ocean, and the chart in consequence had a very sinister appearance. It brought the Battle of the Atlantic very near to one's mind. There was the pattern of the conflict, changing from hour to hour. By morning the enemy might, with reinforcements, draw his fence closer. Or he might be dispersed and weakened. There would be, perhaps, another epitaph to pin upon a sunken ship.

That afternoon a patrolling plane reported having seen a ship's boat, under sail and with three men aboard, about a hundred miles from land. Survivors from a vessel which had failed to come through the fence. The crew of the aeroplane had dropped a supply of food and cigarettes and chocolate, and waved encouragement.

An hour later, from a nearby port, a trawler put out to seek and rescue the three survivors.

### *Sentinels of the Sea*

Between the knuckle-end of Scotland and the Denmark Strait, from the ragged coast of Norway to the immensity of the deep Atlantic, the Royal Air Force has many duties to perform, and the islands that reach like sentry-groups across the ocean give them bases from which to work. The sea is parcelled-out among their squadrons. From longitude This to longitude That a convoy may be watched by planes from Iceland. From longitude X to longitude Y a nearer station will provide its escort. And when the convoy comes within Z miles of such-and-such a shore, there will be fighters circling the sky, like hawks with a selective appetite, waiting to stoop from the sun on swastika'd plumage.

In Scapa Flow—from time to time, as circumstance dictates—lie ships, great and small, of the Home Fleet. So Here and There and Elsewhere are squadrons of fighter-planes to guard the Navy's roost. And at the aerodromes

of Weissnichtwo and Kennaquahair live other planes that fly far to search, with actinic eyes, for the movement of German ships on the other side: raiders, troopers, and supply ships. A commerce raider, discreetly slipping from the Skagerrak at dusk, may be seen, at dawn, a shadow on the mouth of a Norwegian fjord. It is a reconnaissance plane from Kennaquahair that has seen him, and from Kennaquahair the news goes hot to Scapa. Then the Fleet takes action, and from the runways at Weissnichtwo goes up a hunting flight of (for example) geocyclic Inconnus, our latest fighter-bombers. So news is made—unless in fog or darkness the enemy escapes—and the islands that were among the quietest places of the earth have found another story for the front page or the six o'clock bulletin.

*“From Their Northern Eyries”*

But that is not a daily happening, or even a monthly diversion. Of the work of the Royal Air Force about the islands, the greater part by far makes no news at all. The work is vigilance—unending vigilance—and its duty is a constant mind, unfailing skill. Only at long intervals is the reward spectacular. The enemy's long coastline is closely photographed, the seas are hunted, the convoys brought in: the less there is of interruption and conflict, the more evidence that the patrols are serving their purpose. They are keeping the enemy indoors.

But consider the nature of such patrols, the ocean voyages. Ponder the difficulties of navigating by dead reckoning when the wind may shift its direction half-a-dozen times a day, its velocity from hour to hour; as is the habit of the wind about the northern islands. Think of the sky that is always ready to let fall a curtain of thunder, snow, or fog, to hide the homeward view from a returning plane. Note, upon a decent map, the vast-

ness of the sea compared with the littleness of the land, and picture the task of finding a convoy or a U-boat—moving upon variable courses—in that huge emptiness. Then imagine the boredom of circling in the freedom of the sky, for hours on end, above the snail-slow progress of ships upon the water.

And think what comes to break the boredom. . . . A stain of smoke on the pale glimmering sea, a burning ship. An empty raft, a lifeboat crowded with gaunt survivors. Then if the underwater beast is seen—a wash of foam, a white line upon the sea—with what fierce excitement will the hunter turn, dive steeply, and let fall his bombs. Heart exacting a most anxious aim. Then if his luck be in, and justice for a day be wakeful, the nose of the dead beast appearing, and its oily blood upon the sea.

The battle goes to and fro, it covers the North Sea and half the Atlantic, and from their northern eyries the pilots of the Royal Air Force are watching, warding—and choosing the slain.

## VII. *Cargoes for Britain*

WE LEFT REYKJAVIK in fine weather but with somewhat uneasy minds. Two small ships had been torpedoed, the night before, within fifty miles of land, and there was a rumour that the *Bismarck* was out and about in northern waters. We did not wholly believe this tale, because rumours in Iceland come gushing from the earth as numerously as hot springs, but we had not quite enough faith in scepticism to reject it altogether.

Our ship, a vessel of some fifteen hundred tons, had once traded quietly between London and Glasgow, but now was serving as a convoy rescue-ship. We would join a convoy somewhere to the south of Iceland and if any ship in it was torpedoed, bombed, or struck a mine, we should hurry to the scene and pick up survivors. There was a surgeon on board, and a sick-bay. Rope-ladders were coiled in readiness to be thrown over the side, and a couple of rafts, triced to the rigging, could be let go in a few seconds.

It was a Thursday, about midday, when we went aboard, and our escort was already waiting. Two little ships, about a hundred and sixty feet long, that had been built for catching whales in the chill neighbourhood of South Georgia, were to look after us on the first part of the voyage, and for rather more than twenty-four hours they led us into a desolate sea that, hour by hour, grew more deeply ridged and colder. The wind in the funnel-stays made a melancholy harping, and fulmars glided

rail-high or skimmed the crumbling edges of the waves. There was no other sign of life.

We were in ballast, very light upon the water, and rolled heavily. But our escorts, smaller and with gun-platforms to make a heavy top-hamper, rolled fantastically, so that while he on the starboard was showing all his deck, he to port would be exposing half his bottom. There has never been, at any time or place, much humanity in war, but to sink by stealth a ship in mid-Atlantic, where nature herself shows violence and cruelty enough to satisfy the wildest imagination, is surely the most fearful of war's excesses.

### *Town at Sea*

Late on Friday afternoon, after an hour or two of searching roundabout—now plunging head to the waves, now rolling deeply, now lurching before a following sea—we discovered, far away on the port bow, something that looked like a small town. There was smoke, and a tiny row of dark excrescences that might have been the chimneys of a village street. Slowly we came nearer, and the chimneys became funnels, the houses were revealed as the upper parts of a merchant fleet. There were thirty ships in the convoy, and they were heading a little south of east.

Our leading escort, after a conversation with Aldis lamps, handed us over to a destroyer. He turned again for Reykjavik, and as he headed north, facing the sea, his flaring bows threw curtain after curtain of spray, bridge-high, across him.

We took our station in the convoy. It was sailing on a broad front, in eight columns, with a destroyer patrolling ahead, a destroyer astern, and corvettes like outriders on either flank. It was very pleasant to be in company, and as we examined our company more

closely, and found it good, the sensation became exhilarating.

The thirty ships were of many different shapes, and of different nationalities, but all were alike in being deeply laden. Their holds were stuffed to the limit with war-gear for Britain, and many had cargo lashed upon their decks. Ahead and to starboard we could see a sturdy freighter that carried, in full view, half-a-dozen American fighter-planes. On the other side, on a strange-looking vessel that sprouted derricks on both sides, were two submarine-chasers, American mosquito-craft. And tankers, low in the water, their decks continually awash, were full as eggs with fuel for our ships, our bombers, and our tanks. It was a goodly convoy, and as we slowly perceived the richness of it, we felt, as the most urgent desire of our hearts, a straining wish—it grew to be a prayer—that all might come safely home.

Darkness in those latitudes was short, and in the very early morning the ships again were visible. We grew familiar with them, and searched the several columns to make sure that all were there. The weather was beginning to improve, and we ran mostly before a following sea, though every little while the course was altered, and the wind would come now on one quarter, now on the other.

#### *Escort Duties*

Suddenly one of the destroyers swung to the west and put on full speed. A couple of broad fountains showed where she had dropped a pair of depth charges, and presently we heard the *crunch-crunch* of their explosion. The convoy, which had been heading due east, turned sharply with a blowing of steam whistles to the south-east, and a corvette joined the destroyer in a circling hunt. There was an enemy in the deep.

But their quarry escaped. Their quarry was cunning and determined to do mischief. He may have hidden

himself below the convoy, where, in the passage of many ships and the thresh of many screws, the listening ears of the destroyer would find it hard to distinguish the particular note of a submarine. In the afternoon the steel hull of our ship again echoed the shake and the *crunch-crunch-crunch* of depth charges. Again, in interlacing circles, destroyer and corvette went hunting their elusive prey. Two flying-boats appeared from nowhere, as it seemed, and joined them in the search.

A little while before darkness came, one of the smaller ships fell to the rear and stopped. From her funnel blew a billowy unceasing cloud of steam. Her engines had failed her.

An hour or so earlier a Swedish tanker had had similar trouble, and fallen behind. The convoy reduced speed to seven knots till she had made repairs, and caught us again. To see her in distress, and threatened with desertion—for the convoy must go on—had filled us with anxiety, and our feeling of relief when she rejoined us was streaked with elation and sprinkled with joy. But now this little freighter was in more serious trouble and night was very near. She grew smaller on the horizon, and dusk enshrouded her. To be left in that Atlantic loneliness, with an enemy, it was likely, fathoms deep but waiting to surface at the cruel and proper moment, was a fate one shrank from contemplating. It weighed upon the heart with an immense anxiety.

Then, most gladly, we saw a corvette return. The convoy went on, but the little corvette would stand by the troubled merchantman. Some young Lieutenant in his first command, with a crew half-trained—landsmen six months ago—would patrol the darkening sea, and watch with straining eyes, listen with ears alert, lest an ocean-beast should break cover and attack. We went to bed more cheerfully—but kept our trousers on.

Sunday morning came with sunshine and a calm sea.

We looked immediately for the freighter, and there it was, in its old position in the second column from the left. It had made its repairs under the watchful eyes of the corvette, and rejoined us at dawn. The sun shone more brightly, and all the ships put on a gayer look. Black hull and buff topsides looked handsome against a sparkling sea, and an olive-green Norwegian tanker—at which we had grumbled yesterday, because when changing course it nearly ran us down—was now, to clearer eyes, a most gallant sight. We were very close to the ship that carried aeroplanes on her deck, and their sleek painted bodies looked swift and beautiful.

Our hope, our anxious prayer, that all the convoy might come safely home, was by now a growing belief in its security. We had seen the Navy at its work, the ceaseless patrolling of the destroyer, the steady watch of the corvettes, with their sturdy trim and handsome lines. And what we had seen had given us confidence. The Navy was doing its work with zeal and efficiency, with a kind of brilliant steadiness. The tall-sided destroyers, moreover, were two of those that America transferred to us, and their blue-patterned flanks—streaked with the rust of never-ending work—and their tall un-English funnels were a constant reminder of the other nation, so different from ours but yet alike in its love of freedom, that stood by our side in this war for the world's good future.

Then—*crunch-crunch* and a shaking of the hull—one of the destroyers, fetched from idleness in the Navy Yard at Philadelphia, was furiously at work. Again it was joined by a corvette, and this was the most serious hunt of all. The convoy went on, and we lost sight of them. This time, we thought, they had surely found their prey, the U-boat which had been trailing us so hungrily, and now they would not leave it till they had worried it to death. So we thought, and hoped, but because the Navy does

not advertise its well-doing, we were not told and never knew if they had killed. But it was a long time before they rejoined us. By then a pair of bombers, circling widely, had been added to our guard.

### *Landfall*

We made good progress that night, with the wind, freshening again, still behind us, and the convoy increasing speed to ten knots. Before noon we could see through a drifting haze a grey shape of land. Then, an hour or two later, land on the other side. Scotland on the one hand, Ireland on the other. A third of our convoy had already left us, for a rendezvous from which it would take fresh instruction and another escort. Now aeroplanes were continually above us, and in the narrowing sea we formed, in double column, line ahead. We were nearly home.

There was still, however, a casual danger, and a destroyer turned aside to sink a floating mine. Another, which the whole convoy had closely passed, not seeing it, drifted by us not twenty yards away, and a corvette remained to deal with it. Then the convoy divided into two, and half turned to the south, the others to the north. But all were in home waters now, and thirty ships, laden to their full capacity, had brought their cargoes in to feed and strengthen us in war. Here, surely, was an earnest of our victory.

Then, approaching us, we saw another fleet, pointing to the west. We had brought home our gear, and they were seeking the same granary to fetch another harvest in.

Gallant ships, untiring and undaunted. May they have as good an escort and as bright good fortune as ours, we said.

### VIII. *The Faeroes*

SOME OF THE Faeroe islands are whimsically named. There is Kalsö the Man Island, Kunö the Woman Island, and Svinö the Swine Island. There is Big Demon and Little Demon, and running thereabout is a tidal stream that makes a whirling, wild, and mountainous sea in which the fishing-boats that are used to carry troops from one island to another may assume, within a very few minutes, almost every position of disequilibrium, and perform the most strenuous antics short of somersaulting. The most mobile of our troops in these islands are the Lovat Scouts, who, till a few weeks before their departure oversea, were a mounted unit. And having lost their horses they had to acquire, not only marching muscles, but sea-legs also.

One of the most agreeable contrasts imaginable is that between the seaward and landward appearance of the islands. From the sea they are geographical savages. They lift themselves in sudden menace, mountain-tops whose base is hidden by the water—overfalls and spray—and whose peaks are dark as iron in a smoky sky. But there is a change for the better as you approach the land, and when you go ashore you meet a many-coloured lively scene.

Crowded quays and red-capped fishermen. Men coming out of little boats—the perfect model of a Viking longship—with feathery bundles of razorbills, puffins, and guillemots. Painted houses, with the new grass growing on their turf roofs, and hopeful gardens. Fields

bordering every hill, and ditches golden with a sudden growth of kingcups. And children everywhere, swarms of hearty children, so that you may think the land as productive as the sea of fish.

As the Faeroe men are industrious farmers and brave seamen, so their women are hardworking and talented housewives. Their homes are the very nonpareil of tidiness and cleanliness. A house may be small indeed, and if you listen you will hear a pair of cows breathing heavily in the basement, but the rooms will be as brightly immaculate as a good shop-window.

The Faeroese are hospitable and kindly people. Very soon after the occupation they opened their houses to our soldiers, who now, except the incurably shy, have all a modest circle of acquaintances. Their hospitality mollifies one of the routine duties of the Lovat Scouts : the patrolling, that is, of hill-top paths and hidden fjords, of tiny hamlets under a mountainside, and almost inaccessible beaches. Some of their patrols are short, a few hours' marching, but others are three-day tours, and on these they must make their own bivouacs, do their own field-cooking. But whenever they come to a village, someone is almost sure to ask them in for cakes and coffee.

### *The Lovat Scouts*

I joined, one morning, a Corporal and his small command, who were about to do one of the short patrols. We started along the road at a brisk pace. A quicker step than route marching, but nothing to complain about. After a mile or two we left the road and struck uphill across the moor. Here and there was some evidence of a track, but it was rather an article of faith than a path. Cairns, built roughly at intervals, showed the direction. The path grew steeper, but our pace did not slacken.

The hillside became rough, and the track led over an

upward slope of scree. Then it climbed a sort of rampart, a protrusion of rock that ribboned the whole length of the hillside. This was hard scrambling, not marching, and my lungs grew mutinous, my heart as furious as a street-corner orator. I was marching light, but the men wore steel helmets, carried arms and ammunition, rifles and automatic guns that would enable them to fight, if need be, a miniature but effective battle. But they went uphill, up the rocky wall, without a halt or any sign of distress.

Then, on a shoulder of the mountain with a wide view, we rested for five minutes and the Corporal told me that he had been a gillie in Inverness-shire. There were, he said, a good many gillies and stalkers in the regiment, and the other men, who had not been brought up to such advantage, were very satisfactory too. They were learning to walk quite well, considering all things.

They had, I thought—still breathing painfully—learnt all there was to know.

We continued our patrol and came to a long ridge over which the clouds blew thick and low, so that one could see for no more than fifty yards, and the next cairn was hardly visible. But the leading man showed no hesitation, and the Corporal told me that in winter, of course, it was very much worse, when the cloud was really thick and the dark came early. They must march by compass then. But they had had a lot of training in compass marching, and it was quite easy when you knew how to do it, he said.

Suddenly before us the hillside fell away, and we looked through the mist to a lake blue in the sunshine, and the sea beyond. The wind blew coldly, but the far-off picture was warm and bright. We scaled a hill and crossed another moor.

I talked with a Lance-Corporal who came from Benbecula in the Outer Isles. He liked the Faeroes, he

said, and the people too. A few words of their language were the same as Gaelic. The word for a bull was the same. He denied, most modestly, any real knowledge of the language, but the words he mentioned were spoken with the very intonation, the subtle cadence of Faeroese.

At a great pace we descended the hill, came to a hamlet of eight or ten houses, looked at a little harbour, rested for a few minutes, and turned to the ramp of another high moor, beyond which we should see the village wherefrom we had started. A fjord, indeed, would lie between us, but all we had to do was walk up one side, round the head of it, and down the other. If the world's petrol supply should fail, or the internal combustion engine cease to be manufactured, the Lovat Scouts would be unperturbed. They could still walk.

### *Tommy Guns and Bagpipes*

It was a great pleasure to see one of their squadrons playing a war-game, attacking over a wide valley, for the scouts who first advanced had been stalkers on one of the great deer forests, and they moved with the speed and economy, the expert ease of professionals. And the troopers following them went swiftly and with confidence, for they knew that sort of ground very well indeed—rough moorland, peat-bog, and grey boulders—and could find without delay the paths that would take them forward, yet keep them under cover. It was incongruous, of course, but none the less impressive, to see a pair of highly respectable gillies walking-up their game with Tommy-guns.

A pleasure, too, was to hear their pipers, who all come from South Uist and North Uist, where piping is a serious art. Their Pipes and Drums, when they lead a squadron through Torshavn, will bring all the inhabi-

tants to the street, as if to a festival ; but marches and reels and strathspeys are not their whole repertory. They have pipers who can play the greater music, the pibroch, with its infinite variations on some wild and noble theme. When they embarked for the Faeroes the pipers, playing the troopers aboard, made their own choice of a tune and chose *The Big Spree*. And in Torshavn I heard one evening a man from North Uist play the McCrimmon pibroch, *The Lament for the Children*, so finely that in that northern place—the night was clear, the grey sea calm—it sounded like a universal threnody, for youth that savage circumstance destroys.

### *Brushes With the Enemy*

The garrison's experience of hostile action has so far been slight, but interesting. A sea-shore strong-point was on one occasion nearly torpedoed ; for a German plane, diving at some trawlers anchored off Torshavn, released a pair of torpedoes which went below their target and ran ashore, where their explosion narrowly missed a much astonished Lance-Corporal.

Some weeks later a raiding Heinkel was shot down by Bren guns and fire from a Naval trawler. It came down in a fjord, in a thick snowstorm, and the crew took to their rubber boat. They brought off some papers and a bottle of brandy. Then they perceived, awaiting them on the shore, a single trooper, so they threw their papers overboard, drank the brandy, and surrendered.

The Scouts then decided to salvage the Heinkel, which lay in thirty feet of water. They borrowed a trawler and persuaded a local diver to help them. They got the Heinkel safely ashore, and keeping only its crest and a propeller blade for souvenirs, packed up the wreckage and sent it to England. The cost of these operations was two bottles of whisky and one bottle of Drambuie.

There are other troops, of course, in the Faeroes, and to say nothing of them is sheer injustice. But those others, who come from many parts of Britain, live in much the same state as their fellow soldiers in Orkney, Shetland, Iceland, and endure the same discomforts. They are in lonely places, who were born to crowded towns. They are separated from their families and their friends. They know boredom and anxiety. And like the other garrisons they accept these conditions of their service, stand by their guns with vigilance, maintain their purpose, keep their huts and weapons clean. Life is harder for them than for the Scouts, who find nothing much amiss in the quietness of village life ; but the Scouts, because of their mobility, have become part of the Faeroese landscape. Their blue-diced bonnets are known to Syderö in the south and Svinö in the north, and if the Faeroese Dance—that national exercise—is ever modified by new steps, they will surely be a memorial to the Highlanders who broached the northern peace with bagpipes and the Eightsome Reel.

## IX. *Tale of a Tanker*

A TANKER, deep in the water with a great cargo of petrol, was attacked by a German bomber about a hundred and twenty miles west of the Faeroes. A bomb struck the vessel amidships, on the starboard side, and blew away the bridge. Piercing one or more of the tanks, it set the escaping petrol on fire, and, as if in a furnace, all the upper part of the ship was burnt to utter ruin. Nineteen members of the crew were killed, either by fire or the bomb, but sixteen managed to get away. The ship was abandoned in a cloud of flame and filthy smoke. And then, without exploding the other tanks, the fire mysteriously went out, and the ship, still deeply laden, remained afloat.

Two rescue tugs were sent to bring her in. They found her wallowing in the Atlantic swell, her port rail level with the sea, and her rudder jammed. They boarded her and made fast their cables, but because her helm was hard-over, and could not be freed, she would not tow in the ordinary fashion. They had to shift their cables and tow her, slowly and clumsily, stern-first. They brought her to Torshavn and anchored her under the shelving side of Nolsö, the island that lies like a breakwater eastward of the port. It is a peaceful island, and its little village, for some reason, is more backward than most of the Faeroese hamlets. Its inhabitants breed ducks in large numbers and play a game like croquet.

But the arrival of the tanker disturbed their peace. Soon after its coming a German plane flew out of a

cloudy dawn, machine-gunned a lonely hill, and apparently noted the position of the rescued ship. Two days later a Condor flew along the sound and dropped four bombs around the tanker.

In the meantime the crews of the rescue-tugs had been hard at work. They got the ship's rudder straightened, and borrowing a pump from the soldiers in Torshavn—a pump intended for fire-fighting—they succeeded in trimming it by pumping out a flooded tank on the one side, by sealing and filling a damaged tank on the other. The ship now rode on nearly an even keel, but still, for some obscure reason, was unmanageable. An attempt was made to tow her, but she behaved with so contrary a motion that she had to be brought back to her anchorage under Nolsö.

Then the Naval authorities sent James Mackenzie to the Faeroes ; Mackenzie who raised from Scapa Flow the German Fleet that scuttled itself after the first German war ; who knows all there is to be known about salvage, and is diagnostician in excelsis, bone-setter in chief, and miraculous healer to all marine wreckage. Mackenzie spent a day aboard the tanker, and by evening announced that she was ready to sail.

The weather had been fine, and the glass was high, but about eight o'clock a strong breeze sprang up, and the tugboat skippers were reluctant to put to sea. Mackenzie pointed to the hills, from which the clouds were lifting as though sucked away by the westerly sun, and to the upper sky. There was no carry in the sky, he said, and the wind was local. They would up-anchor and go.

His judgment was right, and the sea beyond Nolsö grew calm again. But suddenly the tanker made a wild sheer to port, and while the tugs were valiantly straining to the south, she was pulling viciously to go east. A tidal run, streaming from the islands, had got under her, and for an hour or two her progress was wayward as an

ox on a rope. But before nightfall she had settled down, and was towing steadily, though still with an obstinate nose to the east.

We were five ships all together. There were the two tugs, snub-nosed and sturdy, with the yellowish hulk behind them, and on either flank a trawler for escort. Very early in the morning, when a grey light was shouldering-off the meagre dark, we were joined by an aeroplane, a Hudson of the Coastal Command, and for hour after hour it circled widely above, watching the sky and the sea for enemies. About eleven o'clock it was relieved by another of the same sort, which continued the guard.

*“Bit of a —— !”*

The day was fine, with a calm sea, and there was no interruption to our progress till mid-afternoon, when suddenly one of the tows parted. We had been making good speed—nearly seven knots—and we were about halfway to Orkney. It was terribly exasperating to be brought to a halt, and see our prize, so vulnerable, lie still upon the water.

Aldis lamps began to speak, from tug to trawler, from trawler to the aeroplane. “Tug has parted its tow,” we informed the aeroplane. “Bit of a —— !” replied the Hudson philosophically, and continued its spiral guard. “How long will it take you to get your tow aboard?” we asked the tug. “One hour to haul it in,” he answered.

The tow-rope was eighteen inches in circumference, as thick as a man's thigh, and to haul its great length from the sea was a tedious job. We steamed up and down, and passing close to the tanker saw that the wire hawser by which the rope was made fast had parted near the fair-lead. The nose of the tanker, always worrying to work away to port, had slowly fretted through it.

Never was a more desolate sight than that rusty tanker. Her bridge had disappeared, all of it but some steel decking, bent like a bow, and some twisted stanchions, and this remnant drooped miserably overside. There was a great ragged hole in her deck, surrounded by thick petals of torn steel, and from here the fire, gushing like an oil well, had clothed the whole ship in flame. All her stern part, the after-bridge and the accommodation under it, had been burnt to a shell. The long cat-walk, from bridge to after-bridge, had been contorted by the heat, and sprung apart. Her main deck was buckled, and nowhere did an inch of paint remain. Her naked hull had covered itself with rust. She was rusty as if she had been drifting about the sea for ten years. And in small heaps of debris on her deck—little rubbish heaps of red dust—were fragments of bone. Swallowed in the furnace of escaping oil, many of her crew had been burnt to death.

But the bulk of her cargo remained. There were nearly eight thousand tons of petrol in her holds, and the ship herself might be repaired, or, at the worst, broken up to make valuable scrap. She had escaped fire and a Condor—and the glass was still high.

### *From the Edge of Beyond*

Two hours went by, a long-hundred of slowly dragging minutes. Then the tug, having made fast a new cable, began to pay out his tow. He rang his engines to half-speed ahead, and the rope straightened. Too fast, too fast, we thought, as the rope lifted and like a sea-serpent leapt from the water. Too fast, he'll break it! There was thirty-five hundred horse-power in the tug-boat's engines, and a huge dead weight behind.

But he slowed in time, and gradually the tanker began to move, and the two tugs, side by side like carriage

horses, went steadily on. A little white wave showed at the tanker's stem, and quite suddenly we were all happy again.

Just before dusk, on the port bow, a rocky shape grew visible on the horizon. "Foula," said the Captain of the trawler, "the Edge of Beyond."

He began to talk about books and authors. He had read widely and quite unsnobishly, as a rolling stone will read, who takes his books like his landfalls, by choice if possible but by chance if need be. He had a mate's ticket, but in addition to seafaring he had been a farmer in Kenya and a commercial traveller in Glasgow. He had abandoned commerce when he perceived that he hated all his customers ; and returned to sea.

He named some of his favourite authors—a mixed company—and asked, "What do you think about Virginia Woolf ? I like her better than anyone else, though I had to read her hard before I could make out what she was driving at. I read *The Waves* three times, and the third time it was grand."

At four o'clock on the following morning I returned to the bridge. It was not dark, but not yet light enough to see very far. But quickly the sky cleared, and far away on the one side was the tall broken back of Fair Isle, and on the other, barely visible above the sea, like a pencil lying on a shadowy table, the flat island of North Ronaldshay. By breakfast time we were in Orkney waters, and a little later, with fighter-planes above and the guns of a shore-battery ahead, our escort duty was done.

Mackenzie and the tugs had saved another ship from Germany and the engulfing sea.

## x. *Orkney and Shetland*

ABOARD THE SHIP that brought us back from Iceland there was a soldier going home—to an empty home—on compassionate leave. He lived in Lowestoft. His wife and their little boy had one day been walking along a street when a German plane, diving from cloud, came down with machine-guns firing. It raked the harmless street, scattered the women on the pavement. The soldier's wife was killed, and on the road beside her the child lay with a couple of bullets in his left thigh. . . . The soldier told me this without much visible emotion. He was a grim-looking fellow who had been a fisherman, and he had learnt, at sea, the sternest sort of patience. But now in his patience there was an expectant quality, as though he were watching the anger that smouldered in his mind. Watching, and waiting, for the chance to let it flame.

In the ship that took us to the Faeroes there was a Battery Sergeant-Major returning from ten days' leave in Belfast. There had been a heavy raid while he was at home, and his house had been ruined. His wife and family had escaped unhurt, but in a neighbouring house his sister and her five children had all been killed together. . . . His voice, as he told me this, was under perfect control, but his eyes were like the eyes of a boxer who is waiting, watching, and ready for the chance to go in, toe to toe, and fight. There was a mild alarm one day, when it seemed as though there might be a submarine in the neighbourhood. In the smaller part of a

split second the Sergeant-Major was beside me, and jerking a thumb at our twelve-pounder gun and the Naval ratings who manned it, he exclaimed, "I know all about them things. I'd better stand as relief to the crew. If anything happens to them, I can handle it." Had he been given, at that moment, his choice of Heaven or a shot at a U-boat, he would have taken both : by shooting at the Hun and thinking himself in glory as he did so. A patient man, because discipline made him so. But discipline was riding him on the curb.

In Shetland one day I was talking to one of the Sergeants of a battalion of Highland infantry : a young man, squarely built, fair and blue-eyed. His company had just returned from a long route march. A couple of pipers had led them on to their parade ground. It used to be a fish-quay, but served its new purpose well. When they were dismissed the men hurried to a row of huts that had been built for the noisy young women who, in peace-time, followed the herring fleet from port to port, and day after day, for months on end, gutted thousands of glimmering fish with tireless dexterity. But this year there will be no herring-gutters in Shetland, and the Highlanders have inherited their huts. They have good fireplaces in them, they are more homely and comfortable than the usual Nissen, and the soldiers are well pleased with such accommodation.

Indeed the battalion had much apparent cause for satisfaction. The men were smart on parade, well drilled and very fit. The company which had just done a twenty-mile march, over hill-roads, showed no sign of weariness. Some of the men were already kicking a football about. Their food was good, and they had a pleasant little Regimental Institute. . . . The Sergeant to whom I was talking was reluctant to admit that anything could ever be wrong with service in his battalion. With sidelong glances at a Subaltern of his company he

maintained, most resolutely, that neither he or any of the men had the smallest cause for grumbling. But at last, with a sort of desperation, he exclaimed, "Well, we're all tired of just practising. We're tired of doing attacks, and going up a hill only to find that the fellows on the other side are wearing tin hats the same shape as our own. We want something better than that. We want action."

"We must be patient" said the Subaltern.

"Yes, sir. I know that. But it's not easy," said the Sergeant.

*"A Messerschmitt a Week Would  
Keep Them Happy"*

In another part of Shetland was a seaplane anchorage. It was surrounded by low hills, tiger-striped with snow, and a bitter wind ruffled the water. Airmen in woollen caps and long boots, whistling as they walked, passed each other on the streets of a camouflaged village of Nissen huts. On the beach, a yard or two from shore, lay the broken undercarriage of a Messerschmitt 110.

Some distance from the anchorage there was an anti-aircraft battery. The gunners were a mixed lot, but more than half of them came from North Wales. Their guns were beautifully clean—so much rubbing and polishing must have been inspired by a very passion for cleanliness—every bit of brass was shining, the ammunition lay bright and tidy in its racks. These were the guns that had brought down the Messerschmitt which lay in shallow water by the Air Force camp.

Suddenly, a finger's breadth above the crest of a snow-patched hill, an aeroplane appeared. It was probably one of ours, but the battery was in luck, and it *might* be hostile. The alarm was sounded. At the third stroke on the iron drum the doors of the living huts were thrown

open, and a crowd of men came sprinting—not merely running, but sprinting—across the mud and snow. They flung themselves at the guns. The predictor-crew began to chant its litany. The long barrels pointed at the aeroplane, followed it along the line of the hill. In less than half-a-minute from the sounding of the alarm their shells would have been bursting round the target—had it only been a German. But fortune failed—it was a Blenheim. And the gunners lost their eager look. The zest of their movement was blown out. Enthusiasm dwindled into drill.

Their camp lay in a singularly bleak and cheerless part of the country. Not a house was to be seen, and at that time of the year the moors were uninviting, the sea forbidding.

“I work them hard,” said the Battery Commander, “and at night we have lectures and debates. We’ve made a football field—you can’t see it for the snow—and we’ve got a band. You must keep men occupied in a place like this. They’re very good on the whole, and sometimes I’m surprised when I realise how patient they are.”

“A Messerschmitt a week,” said one of his Subalterns, “would keep them perfectly happy.”

### *Garrison Virtue*

Patience. Not a spectacular virtue, but a supreme necessity for all the troops who guard the cliffs of Britain and watch the changing sky above. Patience on a gun-platform, patience in a field with a searchlight, patience on the piers where every day new cargoes are unloaded.

I remember a day in Orkney in the winter of 1939. . . . On the edge of a cliff, seventy feet above the sea, a couple of men were sandbagging a corrugated iron shanty that housed the fine mechanism of a searchlight. A south-

easterly gale was blowing, and they were wet with spray. They paused in their work to watch two cruisers, followed by destroyers, turn the corner of a rocky islet, and head into the sound for their anchorage. As they turned, and took the gale and the high-running sea on their beam, the ships leaned over so that the men on the cliff could see the whole expanse of their decks.

They went back to work, and a moment later the lip of a broken wave, carried high by the wind, leapt over the cliff and soaked them to the skin.

Three miles away, on the northern shore of the island, a little steamer lay at anchor while a boat made slow progress to a rudimentary stone pier. The boat was deep-laden with rations, beer, mail, sacks of coal, and half-a-dozen soldiers. A working-party, shivering on the pier, exchanged gloomy jokes about the prospect of its foundering.

On a neighbouring island a section of a newly-arrived Field Company were building foundations for a cluster of wooden huts. Another section, off-loading hut-sections on the pier, had finished their task and were eating bread and bully in a cold corner. A drifter came in with a new cargo, spray lifting over its bow, and the Skipper, anxious about berthing in that high wind, roaring for someone to take a rope. One of the Sappers, a big man with his mouth full, went to his help. He addressed the Skipper with a kind of indignant tolerance. "Work, work!" he exclaimed, "nothing but — work and never a word of — thanks for it!"

Across the bay some anti-aircraft gunners were contriving, with pieces of iron and casual wood, to make an elementary ablution-bench. They were living in tents and the tents were pitched on peat, because for miles around there was nothing else but peat. No one who has not lived in such conditions can realise the exasperating difficulty of securing a tent, against recurrent gales, in

the yielding soil of a peat-bog ; or the infuriating impossibility, in a rainy climate, of draining such a soil. The battery cooks, at work in makeshift kitchens—all draught and no shelter—were said, at that time, to show occasional signs of ill-humour.

I went aboard a small steamer to cross the Flow. There was a Sergeant of the Royal Artillery there, who had been gun-busting in the south isles. Heaving ashore, hauling uphill, man-handling into position the guns for a new coast-defence battery. Heavy work—and cunning skilful work—with block and tackle, handspikes and rollers and great oaken chasses.

Also on board was a very young, a slightly-built and tender-looking Lieutenant in the R.N.V.R. He was growing a beard, a yellow downy beard that did no more than advertise his youth. His character, however, was sterner than his appearance, for he commanded a mine-sweeper, and was most happy to be in such employment. He was having a splendid time, he said, and there was only one thing that worried him. That was the difficulty of house-keeping for a crew of fifteen. Yes, he had a cook. But he wasn't a really experienced cook. He had only been in the Navy for two or three months, and before that he had been the leader of a dance band. He had been sent to a cookery school for three days, but all he seemed to have learnt was how to make cheese-straws.

### *Defence of Scapa*

On the Mainland—the mainland of Orkney, that is, for the people of Orkney very properly recognise no other—in what had formerly been a fishing hotel, the Staff was at work. Staff officers, though often spared the fury of the wind, had to make allowance for it in their calculations. They wrestled with ever-new problems of transport and accommodation, the rationing and adminis-

tration of a command, already scattered over several islands and many miles of difficult country, that was growing in size and complexity every day. In the throes of construction they had to plan, against all manner of attack, the tactics of defence.

The urgency of their task was clear. Under the ridged surface of Scapa Flow the torpedoed hulk of the *Royal Oak* was there to prove it. The Fleet had become a nomadic force, and would not again use Scapa Flow as a permanent anchorage till the Flow had been properly fortified.

“Work, work!” said the Sappers building camps on field and moorland. “Nothing but — work,” said the Gunners, hauling new guns to the brink of a cliff. “And never a word of — thanks,” said the Infantry and the Pioneers, unloading at every pier the endless cargoes of timber and corrugated iron, of guns and trucks, stores of every kind and ammunition beyond counting.

But they got their reward in the Spring of 1940, when the Fleet returned, and the Luftwaffe came soon after. The Luftwaffe made a series of heavy and determined attacks, on the islands and the ships that lay in their midst, and the newly-mounted guns fulfilled their purpose. The Orkney skies, that are familiar with the pale brilliance of the Northern Lights, became acquainted with a more lurid glare, and their northern peace was shattered by a fearful and victorious clamour. The Luftwaffe retired, hurt.

But work continued. The strategic importance of Orkney and Shetland had been aggravated by Germany’s occupation of Norway, and this extension of the war made necessary a new conception of the part which the islands could, or might have to play. More troops arrived.

I was out of Orkney for some time, and when I returned I was impressed by all the evidence of accomplishment.

I had seen the beginning, and much of the growth, of the defences. Now they were in being. The ramparts of the Fleet were armed, and the garrison were trained men. The vital confusion had settled down and become a vital order. The guns were in position, ceaselessly manned. The cargoes of corrugated iron had become villages, and between the huts were tidy paths, in front of them gardens had been planted. The occupation was becoming a military civilisation. The troops had their own newspaper, their organised games, and reasonable amusement. They had a new appearance, better than the old. They were self-confident, well-muscled. They knew their work, and were fit for it.

To see this transformation was a useful lesson in patience—that invaluable but undecorative virtue—for it was long and patient work which had created it.

In the early months of the war the men, suddenly translated from the industrial south, regarded their service in these unknown islands as something of an adventure. Only a few of them enjoyed it. A few found early liking for the long line of the hills, rising bare and smooth against a lucent sky; for the rising fields, bearded with gold, or quiet in winter with the soft unbrushmarked colour of an old painting; for stone cottages and the deep triumphant blue of the lakes and the island firths. But many more disliked the loneliness and hated the recurrent gales. The men most poorly equipped, in education and intelligence, suffered most hardly from the change. Accustomed only to one environment, they had imagined no other, and had few resources in themselves with which to combat loneliness. It became apparent that education has greater uses than the levering of a man into a job that will pay him a living wage. Education may supply his mind with emergency rations. It may put muscle into his adaptability.

Nowadays, when Orkney shows almost as many signs of military occupation as of its native life, the men find less to surprise them and more to make them comfortable. They are very healthy, and reasonably happy. Nowadays it is the people of Orkney who have more reason for complaint than the troops who are quartered in their fields. For soldiers, though pleasant neighbours, are uncommonly expensive when their camps diminish the acreage of a farming community whose land, to begin with, was none too plentiful. And aerodromes, though admirably of service to the whole country, are always disastrous to some parts of it. A concrete runway will ruin more ploughland than forty bomb-loads.

But Orkney does not grumble when its precious fields are taken for the fight against Nazidom, and farmers' wives, with fewer eggs to count than formerly, still find a few to give the soldiers who have become their friends. Hospitality, both in Orkney and Shetland, is a habit of the land, and in the island of Unst, in Shetland, a Sergeant told me with gravest warning : "Never go out visiting here unless you've got a good appetite. Because if you're once inside a house, you'll never be able to leave without eating one meal at the least, and it may well be more."

The islands have put their own men into the fighting services in generous numbers. In Orkney, at the outbreak of war, the garrison consisted entirely of local Territorials ; and in many a croft in Shetland there was no one left but women, and perhaps one old man, to break the earth—with a long spade—against the spring sowing. But they are waiting, as patiently as the soldiers, for the harvest that will come at last. In Orkney, however, intermingled with patience, there is general determination that the remnants of the German Fleet, when finally they surrender, shall not be allowed to scuttle themselves, as did their predecessors, in Scapa Flow. For the Flow, in peace-time and fine weather, is a very

lovely stretch of water, too good for a German graveyard.

*“ Whaur Hae You Been a’ the Day? ”*

There is, in Shetland, a collar of land on which a Scottish battalion had made its camp. I was listening, one evening in early spring, to its Pipes and Drums playing Retreat. It was a fine evening, with a cold north-easter blowing, and in the clear air the cliffs stood sharp and brown, the inlets of the sea were a pale bright blue. The band was playing well, with swagger and precision in its marching, with clean fingering, good notes, and a great flourish of drum-sticks. Then, above the drone of the pipes, we heard the drone of a returning aircraft. It was a Blenheim, coming home to roost. The band was playing *Hielan’ Laddie*:

*“ Whaur bae you been a’ the day,  
Bonny laddie, Hielan’ laddie,  
Whaur bae you been a’ the day . . . ”*

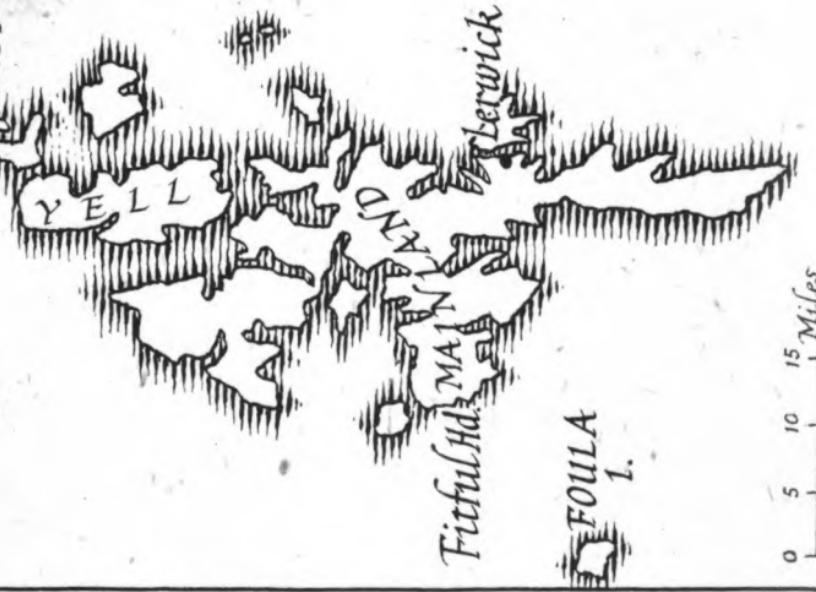
“ Norway,” said the Pilot, when he joined us in the Highlanders’ mess.

There is, in Orkney, an island that commands one of the entrances to Scapa Flow. There are batteries mounted on the cliff, and fulmars, riding the breeze, sail past the muzzles of the guns. Gannets with a silvery splash dive deep into the sound. On a spring morning, against the staccato coughing of anti-aircraft guns at practice, you may hear the drumming of a snipe. A crofter, ploughing his small field, must drive his plough through the shadow of a barrage-balloon. And women, coming from the byre, stand to watch a battleship go out, or destroyers with a bone in their mouth come racing in.

Ask them where they have been, and what will the answer be?

Narvik, the Denmark Strait, or anywhere between.

KUNST  
SHESTLAND  
1.



ORKNEY N.  
1.

RONALDSAY



KUNA  
ALSO  
SWING  
FAEROES

SYDERO

10 20 Miles



PENTLAND FIRTH

5 10 Miles



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